

ONE hot day in July, I travelled up to Bingley to see Peter Wilson, who has been elected to the position of Chairman of the Board of Management of the STRI.

Changes have been coming thick and fast at Bingley since Dr Peter Hayes took over almost five years ago as Director. With an hour to spare before my appointment, I took the opportunity to walk round the entire establishment and note the changes.

The most striking feature is the new building which has a certain modern charm about it. Thinking back to the cramped and dusty premises which were rented for over fifty years in the main building of the St Ives estate, there can be no nostalgic feelings of regret for the old days. Instead there is the quiet hum of computers, spacious laboratories and even a pleasant library with a handy collection of books and periodicals from across the world.

Outside, in the blistering heat, at first sight the trial plots still have the distinctive pattern of replicated experiments which would have been familiar to Norman Hackett, ten years before his Bingley brainchild could be brought into being.

Today's actual experiments, however, seem to be changing with increasing rapidity. Just time to feel a moment's regret at the sight of the museum of grass species and weeds near the entrance being moved to another location after so many years, and then the realisation that workable space here is at a premium.

Next, a walk down to the newest terrace at the lower end of the plots, where two young men in shorts were carrying out controlled fertiliser experiments on the sand based plots which form part of the work being financed by the R & A.

Two thoughts flitted through my mind - firstly, that it isn't just policeman who look younger - so do some agronomists and research scientists! Secondly, and not with any great surprise, that a pure sand green sown to a mixture of fescue

and bent begins to look remarkably like a traditional British seaside links. The inherent difficulties in managing a pure sand green are being faced and analysed and it seems likely that increases in nitrogen may be causing increasing dominance of the bents. I don't think we really knew that before!

My hour had passed and I must hurry back for my talk with Peter Wilson, a member of the delightful Formby club near Southport and still a very useful golfer, though getting little practice these days. To use his own words: *"My game is so variable I can take as many as 55 strokes for the first nine and return in as few as 35"*.

He is a man with a legal training (and it shows) and many years in practice as a solicitor, but also some years of rearing beef cattle and an interest in the French grassland ecologist Andre Voisin. Voisin wrote a number of books in the Fifties and Sixties which were published worldwide and was a pioneer in raising interest in grasses.

FACE TO FACE

**Eddie Park
talks to
Peter Wilson,
Chairman
of the Sports Turf
Research Institute**



The trial grounds at Bingley, showing in the foreground, museum plots used for grass and weed identification.

Peter Wilson's commitment and enthusiasm for the administrative side of the golf game is impressive and is targetted at what he believes are the main concerns of the club golfer - the golf course and the handicapping system. Would that all golf administrators shared his priorities! We had no time to discuss handicapping, but it is of interest that he is a member of the USGA handicap research team.

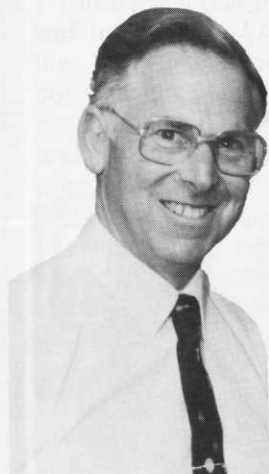
On the greenkeeping side he was originally proposed by Frank Fawcett, now a Vice-President of the STRI, to serve on the Greenkeepers' training committee which was going through a difficult period some years ago, and he is in his second spell as chairman. Meanwhile he had been nominated to the STRI Board to represent the EGU and became Vice-Chairman. His name came especially to the notice of greenkeepers when he chaired the steering committee set up to try to form a joint Association and he is a trustee of BIGGA. Just for good measure he is a member of the greenkeeping panel set up by the R & A.

So it is a man with a formidable appetite for committee work who now chairs the Board of Management at Bingley. He is quick to pay tribute to his predecessor John Tanner for the progress we are now seeing. Mr Tanner held office for ten years and without his judgement and ability to mobilise financial aid from the world of football, it is doubtful if the STRI would have survived.

As Peter Wilson points out, the increasing emphasis on golf turf actually has valuable spin-offs benefits for other sports as golf consistently demands only the highest quality turf.

In the course of a discussion on financing, I learned some interesting facts. As opposed to some other research institutes, the STRI has to earn practically every penny it spends. No government handouts to maintain the infrastructure.

There is some government cash channelled through the Sports



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PETER WILSON

Council (£71,500, which equates to 13% of turnover) the greater part of which is likely to continue because it represents payments for services rendered - for instance vetting grant applications, education, etc. Research work there actually saves money for the Government purse, for example by undertaking research into new varieties of grass which require less cutting, and also research into low maintenance inputs for Local Authority grass maintenance.

Total annual turnover is now about £600,000, a figure which has almost doubled over the past five years. Apart from a small number of ex-gratia donations, this is all earned in one of two forms, either as payment for advisory services or as funding for research contracts.

I soon discovered that Peter Wilson shared my belief that the potential market for golf advisory services may turn out to be much larger than has been hitherto to apparent. How then could that potential be realised?

"The first thing is to let the greenkeepers see that they can trust our advisers and then I hope that they, and not always the clubs, will be keen to take the initiative in calling for advice in the early stages of a problem."

Following this, a desire that members of a unified Greenkeepers' Association will get into the habit, around the country, of meeting in small local groups to share their expertise and discuss their problems and jointly realise

the benefits of professional advice.

Another positive though was that more instruction might be aimed at the head greenkeepers in particular, "...as that will influence larger numbers more quickly". Not with standing "It must be right that 90% of greenkeeper training should continue to take place in the workplace".

We found ourselves in complete agreement that many greenkeepers were living in a "pressure-cooker" atmosphere because of the problems of interference with sensible long-term plans by members and club committees. The Board would take a sympathetic look at the need, not just to give agronomic advice to clubs, but to take a hand in the task of persuading them to implement it in full. Help from the golf unions in the education of golfers in general would be advantageous. Said

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Peter, "The Board accepts and is investigating the possibilities of increasing business by offering improved advisory services". But there have been substantial improvements already, such as the much more "personalised" reports to each club (indeed a far cry from the old brief and rather generalised reports) and also by the formation of a specialised 'golf unit' with four or five agronomists dealing only with golf courses.

The STRI recognises that fuller initial surveys, plus management plans, plus follow-up visits, should be available for those who need them. A last word on golf advisory work - it has risen by 23% this year and construction consultancy work by no less than 50% (This latter category includes the recent announcement that the STRI will act as the main consultants for the new South Course at Wentworth).

The positive goodwill shown by Jim Arthur in suggesting to many of his former client clubs that they now use the STRI is acknowledged, and there is satisfaction that the institute is now the joint agronomist to the R & A with responsibility for the qualifying courses for the Open Championship.

So, to the research side of things, which represents 30% of turnover, and first a bleak statement that golf has had little or no research done in the past, simply because it hasn't paid for any. In the context of a research establishment setting out to fulfil contracts that really does mean "nowt for nowt". It is clear that the initial decision by the R & A to use some of it's profits from the Open to finance golf course research has been a great step forward.

There is now enthusiasm for golf and increasingly the Annual Journal reflects that in it's content. Incidentally this year's edition has been totally edited by STRI staff (led by Mike Canaway, the senior research officer) to the point that only a small computer disc had to be sent to the printers - a feat of which the Chairman is justly proud.

Three initial golf projects are now well under way. I have mentioned the large experiment on the construction, maintenance and requirements of pure sand greens, and they are already showing practical results. Neil Baldwin, the pathologist, is deeply involved in the Fairy Ring problem and has added to his brief the question of Dry Patch. (see pages 22/23).

The thing about that project that will appeal to many people is the fact that much of the work is being done on the fairways and greens at golf clubs in nearby Yorkshire and Lancashire. In the Thirties, Bingley maintained what they termed "outstations" at a number of clubs, such as Muirfield and Western Gales, where they could rely on the head greenkeeper to oversee experiments on normally managed courses. A return to that tradition will do much to reassure those who doubt if all the academic experiments on a Yorkshire hillside will produce results that will assist the practical man.

The most dramatic studies are those by Steve Haake on ball impact on golf green turf under the joint supervision of Dr Alastair Cochrane of Aston University, who supplies much of the expertise for the balls and implements committee of the R & A. This basic research has also been assisted by a contribution towards equipment from Acushnet. Steve is already visiting clubs with his fascinating battery devices, developed for firing golf balls on to turf with known velocity and backspin and recording the impacts using stroboscope photography. A computer model of the process of impact has also been developed.

There are tremendous implications in this research for greenkeeping. Are we right to go to the enormous expense that would be required if receptive greens at all times are demanded? And can they be viable in the long term?

The R & A now has machinery to ensure that funds generated by the Open Championship are wisely

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spent for the benefit of the fame of golf. A number of papers have been submitted by the STRI, detailing a strategy for possible research and some projects dealing especially with irrigation, ecological surveys and the specific requirements of bents and fescues. These are at present being considered, but there is every indication that golfing research, so long neglected, is now viewed with enthusiasm by the authorities.

The advantages of having a research capability under the same roof as an advisory service are now more obvious than ever. There are so many current problems on golf courses to which the honest answer has to be that we do not really understand what is happening. For too long American research and methods were followed and have proved to be inappropriate in our climate.

Peter Wilson, as Chairman of the Board of Management of the STRI was keen to promote all these present achievements of the staff and to involve us all in their future. He comes over as a man with a lawyer's habit of precision and of insisting on hearing both sides of the case, probably no bad thing in a job with such responsibilities.

We must all wish both he and the Institute well; nobody, least of all myself, would pretend that the task facing them is an easy one. It will require a great deal of imagination and creativity to produce the advice and research that is so badly needed.